THE ENIGMA OF A NAME
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Psalm 105:1–6
Romans 12:9–21
Exodus 3:1–15

"God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'"
Exodus 3:14 (NRSV)

It is the seeking that counts.
It's so easy to forget that simple truth in a capitalistic society
that teaches us to win, have, amass, and define the best of us
as the one who has the most of these things. . . .
But in the God-life, the seeing is itself the end.
We never "get" God, but we always "have" God.
We never "find" God. But we forever dwell in God.
So, if I'm seeking God, I have already come to God.

Joan Chittister
Called to Question

Dear God, we come here this morning from lives
that are busy, crowded, overbooked, overcommitted.
We come to be quiet for a while and to be with you.
Come now. Startle us again with your truth, your love,
your reality here and also in the busy lives we lead.
Speak your word, the word we need to hear.
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Ordinarily you would not associate St. Augustine, fourth-century Bishop of Hippo, and Bruce Springsteen with one another. And yet, separated by 1,700 years and, even more, by culture and profession, they both said something similar and important.

> St. Augustine: "Thou madest us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in thee."
>
> Bruce Springsteen: "Everybody has a hungry heart."

Hungry, restless hearts. We are made that way: hungry, restless, with a need deep within us for something—some source of meaning, some ultimate, something to trust and live for.

The recent *Newsweek* cover article is one of many major news magazine features this summer reporting on and analyzing the Springsteen–Augustine conclusion. “Spirituality in America,” the cover announced over the picture of a young woman, arms raised, eyes closed in prayer.

The article began by describing the way this new spirituality transcends particular religions, citing Roman Catholic monk Thomas Keating, who in the 70s was among the first to recognize the similarities between Christian mysticism and Zen Buddhism and invited a Zen master to lead spiritual retreats at his monastery. The article described the amazing “flowering of spirituality everywhere” in American culture these days. It is, however, not helping church attendance much. This flowering of spirituality happens—sometimes within organized religion and sometimes outside. But universally, there is an authentic hunger, as Bruce Springsteen and Augustine suggest, and also a new public willingness to do something about it.

The article concluded with a fine essay by Martin Marty, Emeritus Professor of Church History at the University of Chicago, who wrote, “young people get tired of hearing that once upon a time people experienced God directly. They want it to happen for themselves. They don’t want to hear that Joan of Arc had visions. They want visions.”

Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, has written a very helpful book on the subject, *Called to Question*, which is a personal memoir describing her own spiritual journey—inside the church, but not always happily.

She writes, “Religion is about what we believe and why we believe it. It is about the tradition, the institution. . . . It gives us creeds and dogmas and definitions of God. . . . Spirituality is about the hunger in the human heart. It lifts religion up from the level of the theoretical or the mechanical to the personal” (p. 19).

What is the one essential attitude for an authentic spirituality? Sister Joan’s answer is an attitude that knows that “God is greater than religion” (p. 21). “We name God poorly and we name God only partially,” she says (p. 31).

The Bible tells stories about human beings and their spiritual experience. The Bible is not theoretical. It does not propose theories about God or God’s attributes. The Bible nowhere launches an argument for the existence of God. What the Bible does is tell stories, very human stories about God and men and women and children in relationship. And one of the oldest and best

of those stories involves Moses and the burning bush and the enigmatic name of God. It is also one of the Bible stories everyone should know, the basis for a series of sermons I began earlier this summer. By the way, I was delighted to learn that John Cairns and Cynthia Campbell continued that motif. Cynthia's sermon two weeks ago about Joseph situated the twelve tribes of Israel, named after Jacob's sons, in Egypt, where there was food. There was also an ambitious monarch in Egypt who gradually transformed the Hebrew guests into forced labor, slaves. But the more Pharaoh enslaved and ghettoized and oppressed the Hebrews, the more they thrived and grew in such numbers that authorities began to worry about the potential for revolt or even escape. And so a ghastly plan was proposed to kill all the Hebrew boy babies.

It was then that baby Moses was born. His mother hid him for as long as she could and then concocted a creative plan. She made a basket of papyrus, or bulrushes as we were taught in Sunday school. Once when we heard this story, the Sunday school teacher put us to work weaving tiny baskets from strips of green paper and library paste, a disastrous project, I recall. I'm even told that the old story has inspired an item every family with a new infant needs these days, a Moses basket. In any event, his mother placed the baby in the basket, placed the basket in the shallow water in the reeds near the bank of the river, and posted his older sister nearby to watch and see what happened.

What happened was that Pharaoh's daughter, bathing in the river, found the basket and the now crying baby, was touched, and decided to keep him as her own. His older sister appeared, asked the royal princes if she'd maybe like a little help—a nurse to assist with the baby. The princess thought that was a good idea. The older sister produced her mother, who was hired on the spot and cared for the child, her baby. Pharaoh's daughter officially adopted the child and called him Moses.

The story gets complicated. Moses grows up in the royal household but somehow knows his ethnic heritage. One day, a young man now, he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, one of his countrymen. Moses intercedes and, in the altercation that follows, kills the Egyptian. The incident is seen and reported, and Pharaoh decides that Moses is a murderer. And so Moses flees, goes far away—ends up in Midian—meets and marries his wife, and goes to work for her father, Jethro, as a sheep herder.

The Hebrews continue in bondage, in Egypt, suffering, crying out to God for deliverance. Moses, meanwhile, is tending to business, building a new life and family and future until that day, watching the sheep, near Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God, he sees a bush on fire. He takes a closer look and hears the voice, "Remove your shoes; come no closer. You are standing on

holy ground. I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." Moses understandably hides his face.

Then comes the plan. "I have observed the misery of my people," the voice says. "I have heard their cry. I'm going to deliver them. And I'm going to send you to lead them out of their bondage."

I love Moses' response: "Why me? Who am I that I should go?" I've always identified with Moses at that moment. Settled, comfortable, maybe beginning to enjoy the rewards of his hard work, free finally of his past, maybe secure for the first time since that day long ago when he killed a man and ran from his life. Of course he doesn't want to go back to Egypt. Why me?

The thing about biblical spirituality is that it is not only a personal experience of God; it comes with a strategic plan for your life. God comes to people in the Bible, accosts people, interrupts stable and secure lives, not just to satisfy the spiritual hunger in their hearts but to give them a job to do. In fact, an encounter with God in the Bible often comes with a new identity. God wants Moses to be a liberator and Jeremiah to be a prophet. Jesus wants his disciples to become fishers of men and women. Jesus wants Peter to be a rock and Paul to be an apostle. Spirituality comes with an assignment attached, a vocation not often welcome but resisted. Why me?

Chris Hedges is a distinguished journalist and foreign correspondent, graduate of Harvard Divinity School. He has written a fine new book, *Losing Moses on the Freeway,* in which he describes his harrowing experience as a student pastor of a small, difficult Presbyterian Church in the worst neighborhood of Roxbury. It was an experience that changed his life utterly. It motivated him to move from ministry to journalism and international politics. "If you want to make God laugh," he writes, "tell God your plans" (p. 19).

"I will go with you," the voice responds. "But if they say, 'Who sent you?' what shall I tell them? What's your name?" Moses asks.

"I AM WHO I AM," the voice says. "Tell them I AM has sent you."

It's perplexing to say the least. It's not a name at all. It's a verb: the basic verb "to be," the basic component of all language, the "be" verb.

The Hebrew can be translated

> I AM WHO I AM
> or
> I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE

or
I AM THE ONE WHO IS
or
I WILL CAUSE TO BE WHAT I WILL CAUSE TO BE
or
I WILL BE WHO I AM

However it is translated, something very important is being said here in this ancient story about God and about the human experience of God. It is, after all, a great opportunity for God to say who God is, to resolve the mystery once and for all. "I am a King, a King above all kings," the voice could have said. "I am a warrior. I am a Rock, the Sun and Moon. I am a Father, a Mother, the Wind beneath your wings."

Running deeply through these old stories is the Hebrew fear of idolatry. Nothing is to substitute for God. Northing is to represent God—no picture or icon, no statue, no poem or creed or metaphor or philosophy. Nothing created by human beings is to represent God, because any human representation of God inevitably limits God. And so God, in this early, early story, remains unnamed.

Chris Hedges' book *Losing Moses on the Freeway* is about the Ten Commandments, and on the subject of idolatry, he is particularly eloquent, I think. "Idols come in many shapes and forms. Idolatry is not confined to worshiping and praying to a statue. A baseball player—movie star—celebrity can be an idol. So can an ideology—a nation, a way of life, an economic system. An idol is that to which you give your ultimate loyalty," Hedges writes.

> Warding off the allure of idols is difficult. The God of the Bible is ineffable, unknowable, hidden. The mystery defies and frustrates us. To worship God, it seems, is to worship nothing. . . . Idols comfort and empower us. They can be understood. . . . It is easier to have idols. It is harder to trust the unknown in the darkness, in the voice answering Moses, "I AM WHO I AM.' . . . God cannot be described. Only idols provide that certitude. (p. 40)

The great theologian Paul Tillich warned his students against arguing about God's existence. God, Tillich said, does not exist the way you exist, or a tree or a house exists. God is not a being among other beings. God, Tillich said, *is* Being, the Ground of all being.

The Bible teaches a humble modesty in the face of the mystery that is God. The Bible understands the danger inherent in the human need to define God precisely, to pin God down. The Bible knows how close that comes to formulating God in our image and using God for our purposes.

We know now the tragedy of religion that is utterly certain that it knows the heart and nature and will of God. We know the human tragedy that results when there is no mystery, no doubts, no questions. I do wish Pat Robertson and the other self-appointed spokespersons for Christianity were a little less sure of themselves, a little less sure of God's politics, God's opinions on complex human issues involving when life begins and appropriate sexual behavior and whether heads of state should be assassinated, which is, to say, a little less like the religious extremists who threaten the very fabric of every civilized society. I wish so much that religious leaders would learn the grace to say, on occasion, "I don't know. I'm not sure about that."

Everyone has a hungry heart. Our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Our spiritual search will take us to church sometimes, and sometimes, as is the case with this marvelous story, we will find God, or more probably be found by God, in unexpected places, ordinary places. Moses, after all, wasn't in church or synagogue. He wasn't behaving religiously, saying prayers, making sacrifices. He was doing his job, tending his sheep. I believe that is how it happens—not exclusively when we are here but when we are out there, at work, at play, in our relationships, in our daily round, whatever it is. God interrupts. God comes. God speaks.

I can't imagine my faith without the church, without this wonderful experience of public worship. In fact, when I'm gone, I can't wait to get back to it. I can't imagine my faith without the hymns and prayers, the silence of worship together, or without the mission, the children, the "light in the city." I cannot imagine faith without the community, friends, acquaintances, strangers, and guests—one body in Christ gathered together worshiping God.

But I do not believe God is limited by our practice of religion. In fact, I rather like the idea, from this story, that God comes in the ordinary, daily activity and relationships that constitute our lives in the world.

What you and I need to do is be receptive, listen. That's why we are here: to be reminded of the mysterious presence of God in all of life. This precious church, sitting here in the midst of towering skyscrapers and a daily frenzy of commercial activity, is not so much a refuge from the world as a reminder that God is present out there, in the midst of it all, as well as in here. In here, we intentionally acknowledge the mystery and put ourselves in the place to be confronted and addressed by God but also to be reminded that the God who is the Ground of all being, the source and energy of all life, the Great I AM, is always present and will come to us—perhaps when we least expect it, as we are doing our jobs, making the sale, arguing the brief, performing the procedure, teaching the class, tutoring the child, serving the meal, changing the diaper, writing the sermon.

What we need is to develop receptivity, openness. Joan Chittister suggests that our problem here is that we are divorced from nature, particularly those of us who live in cities, separated from nature's rhythms that across the centuries have reminded people of the mystery of God.

"We are human hamsters," she writes, "on a twenty-four-hour wheel. We work and run and talk at all times. The dark never overtakes us. The silence of the day never sets in. And we wonder why we can never find God. We are never still enough anymore to listen to the voice within that will tell us how" (p. 189).

I read that paragraph just last week, sitting in a rocking chair on a porch, in the early morning, looking out over the ocean, as the sun came up, hearing only the sound of the waves. And it occurred to me that Chittister is right. You and I don't often have the silence and the empty time in which the hunger surfaces and our spirits open to God. And it also occurred to me that God is present in the rest of my busy, normal life and yours as well.

The God who is the Source of all life; the Ground of all being; the always-present mystery; the One who came to Moses, out on the hillside leading his sheep; the One who, centuries later, came again to shepherds, at their work, watching their flocks by night; the One who came in a human birth that forever changed the conversation; the God who came among us in the One who was born and lived and died for us and rose again to be with us, to walk the dusty roads of Galilee and the concrete sidewalks of Chicago, to be with us as we sit in church or patrol the dangerous streets of Baghdad, to come to us, to be with us, to hold us and keep us every day of our lives. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.